

Once Upon a Time Never Comes Again: Bob Dylan, a Masked Man in Search of Redemption?

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"He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it." – George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant"

The lobby of the temple of time travel called the Triplex Cinema in Great Barrington, Massachusetts was suffused with a nostalgic vibe tinged with the whiff of encroaching death when I walked in for *The Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story*. I had earlier asked the ticket girl if most of the tickets for the two sold-out preview shows were being purchased by old people; she told me no, that many younger people had also bought tickets. However, I didn't see any. All I saw were grey or white heads and beards, not with "Time Out of Mind," as Dylan titled his 1997 album, but with time on their minds, as they shuffled into the dark to see where their time had gone and perhaps, if they were not mystified by their fetishistic worship of Dylan, to meditate on who they had become and where they and he were heading in the days to come. I imagined most were aware that Dylan had said that he's been singing about death since he was twelve, and that his music is haunted by images of love and time lost as bells toll for those traveling the road of life in search of forgiveness for their transgressions.

How, I wondered, would this Dylan documentary "story" fashioned by Martin Scorsese, whose own work is marked by themes of guilt and redemption, affect an audience that might never have taken the roads less traveled of their youthful dreams but "fell" into the conformist and oppressive American neo-liberal way of life? Would this film, in Dylan's words, get the audience wondering "if I ever became what you wanted me to be/Did I miss the mark or overstep the line/That only you could see?" Would nostalgia for their youth be a liberating or mystifying force, now that forty plus years have transformed American society into a conservative, postmodern, shopper's paradise where commodity capitalism has reified all aspects of life, including art objects and artists such a Dylan, imbuing them with magical powers to redeem those who buy their products, which include songs and celebrity "auras"? I knew I was sitting among people who had fetishized Barack Obama as a savior even while he was waging endless wars and killing American citizens, bailing out his Wall St. and bank supporters, and jailing more whistleblowers than any American president in history, and that Dylan had accepted the Presidential Medal of Freedom from this icon of rectitude who had served to quell all thoughts of rebellion and whose war victims were not counted by those who bought his brand since God was on his side. Here in this darkened dream factory in a hyper-gentrified "liberal" town, my mind was knotted with thoughts and questions that perhaps the film would address.

The Man Who Isn't

I knew that no one would answer my questions, but I asked myself anyway. Moreover, I knew there is no Bob Dylan. He is a figment of the imagination – first his own and then the

public's. Perhaps behind the character Bob Dylan there is a genuine actor, and I hoped to catch an unintended glimpse of him in the film, but I knew if he appeared it would be obliquely and through a gradual dazzling of truth, as Emily Dickinson would say. An unconscious disclosure. For if the real Bob Dylan took off his mask and stood up, his ardent fans would receive it as a slap in the face, and their illusions would transmogrify into delusions as the spell would be broken. To tell the truth directly is a dangerous undertaking in a country of lies.

Dylan, the spellbinder, has, through his public personae, hypnotized his followers with his tantalizing and wonderful music. "Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me," wrote D.H. Lawrence in his poem, "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through." This sounds like Dylan's artistic credo. His masks (personae = to sound through) have served as his medium of exchange. He has been faithful to his tutelary spirit (if not to living people), what the Romans called one's genius that is gifted to one at birth and is one's personal spirit to which one must be faithful if one wishes to be born into true and creative life. If one sacrifices to one's genius, one will in return become a vehicle for the fertile creativity that the genius can bestow. A person is not a genius but a transmitter of its gifts.

Like Lawrence, Dylan has served as a vehicle for his genius. His many masks, unified by Bob Zimmerman under the pseudonym Bob Dylan, have served as ciphers for the transmission of his enigmatic and arresting art. But while the music dazzles, the "real" man behind the name can't stand up - or is it won't? - because, as always, he's "invisible now" and "not there," as his songs have so long told us.

I wondered if my theater companions understood this, or perhaps didn't want to. Could that be because their own reality is problematic to them? Do generations of his fans sense a vacancy at the heart of their self-identities - non-selves - as if they have been absent from their own lives while reveling in Dylan's kaleidoscopic cast of characters? Do Dylan's lyrics - "People don't live or die people just float" - resonate with them? Lacking Dylan's artistry, are many reluctant to ask why they are so intrigued by the legerdemain of a man who insists he is absent? Has a whole generation gone missing?

I am only familiar with the musician who acts upon a special social stage, and I love his creations. Because Dylan the performer has the poet's touch, a hyperbolic sense of the fantastic, he draws me into his magical web in the pursuit of deeper truths. He is an artist at war with his art and perhaps his true self, and therefore forces me to venture into uncharted territory and ask uncomfortable questions. His songs demand that the listener's mind and spirit be moving as the spirit of creative inspiration moved him. A close listening to many of them will force one to jump from verse to verse - to shoot the gulf - since there are no bridges to cross, no connecting links.

A Magic Show

From the start, *The Rolling Thunder Revue*, a fused compilation of film from a tour throughout New England concocted by Dylan that took place in 1975-6 as a rollicking experiment in communal music making, announces that we are going to be played with and that Dylan and Scorsese are conjurers whose prestigitations are going to dazzle us, which they do. The film is gripping and cinematically beautiful. The opening scene is taken from a very old film in which a woman is sitting in a chair and a man throws a cloth over her. When he pulls the cloth away, the woman has disappeared. Call it playful magic, call it fun, call it

entertainment – we can't say we haven't been warned – but after decades of postmodern gibberish with the blending of fact and fiction, fake news, endless propaganda, and the fiction-of-nonfiction, one might reasonably expect something more straightforward in 2019, but these guys get a kick out of magic tricks and conning people.

I could understand it if it served some larger purpose, but as the film shows, it doesn't. Later in the film, Dylan says, as if he needed to pound the point home, "If someone's wearing a mask, he's gonna tell you the truth. If he's not wearing a mask, it's highly unlikely." This may be true for him, but as a general prescription for living, it is bullshit. Of course lies are commonplace, but isn't it best to strive for truth, and doesn't that involve shedding masks. Then again, what does he mean by a mask?

Society trains us all from an early age to lie and deceive and to be socially adjusted persons on the social stage, and since person means mask, do we need some white face paint to obviously mask ourselves to tell the truth? Why can't one take off the masks and be authentic? Why can't Dylan? In an interview in 1997 with the music critic Jon Parles, Dylan said while he is mortified to be on stage, it's the only place where he's happy. "It's the only place you can be who you want to be." These are the sad words of a man living in a cage, and only he might know why. I am reminded of Kafka's story of the caged Hunger Artist. Yet we are left to guess why Dylan is unhappy off stage, but such guessing is the other side of the social game where gossip and pseudo-psychoanalysis sickens us all as we try to decipher the personal lives of the celebrities we worship. Maybe we should examine our own looking-glass selves.

The Mask Falls

Despite being a masked man, there are times in this fascinating film when the lion in Dylan breaks out of the cage, and while the face paint and costume remain, one can see and hear a sense of short-lived liberation in his performances. His performance of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" is so true, so passionate, so real, so intense that his true face shines through in its genuine glory. The same for his performance of "Hurricane" and a few others. It's all in his face and body, his articulation and energy, his fiery eyes. The performances refute his claim that only a masked man can speak the truth. As Joan Baez mordantly says, "Everything is forgiven when he sings."

There is something elegiac about the film, for many of the people in it are now dead and their film presence – that eerie afterlife that technology confers – conveys the ephemerality of fame – and life. Allen Ginsberg and Sam Shepard are dead, and many of the others are in their twilight years. But to see them young and frisky and bouncing around on stage and off, giving off sexuality and joy in the music and the trip they're on, one can't help be gripped by the passing of time and the contrast between then and now when depression and its pharmaceutical fixes has so many in its grip. Dylan's craggy, lined face in interviews for the film belies the young man we see perform and laugh, and though he stills performs and is addicted to being on the road so often – quite a feat for a 78 year old – the juxtapositions of the images underscores the power of Dylan's musical messages. "Once upon a time," Dylan croons these days, "somehow once upon a time/never comes again."

When one puts the then and now into historical and social perspective – which is essential since works of art are rooted in time, place, economic and political realities – one is jolted further. It's almost as if this Rolling Thunder Revue tour was the last gasp for a dying political and artistic culture that represented some hope for change, however small, while

also being a symptom of the encroaching theatricality of American life, what Neal Gabler aptly calls, *Life: the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*.

The Triumph of Techno-Entertainment

Trace, if you will, the transformation of the United States from 1975-6 until today. It's as if the theatricality of the tour was announcing the end of straightforward dissent and the ushering in of endless postmodern gamesmanship that is still with us. Masks. Games. Generations disappearing into technological and consumer fantasies where making money, watching television, and entering the system that destroys one's soul became the norm, as the American empire ravaged the world and Baby Boomers found life in their cell phones and on yoga mats, as Herbert Marcuse and his compatriots of the Frankfurt School warned. The culture industry absorbed dissent and spit it back out as entertainment in the service of the maintenance and consolidation of the power of the ruling class. How to transform a depraved society when the culture industry has corrupted so many people at their cores is where we're at now. "The carpet too is moving under you," Dylan intoned in 1965, "It's all over now, Baby Blue."

I looked around the movie theater before the film began and the rows were lit up by old folks staring at their little lit-up rectangular talismans. It was enough to bring me to despair. I was reminded of being in the circus in Madison Square Garden as a child where the kids were swinging sticks with cords attached with lights at the end that lit up the place.

They say the circuses are all closing, but I think not. "It's not dark yet/but it's getting there."

In an exchange between Dylan and Sam Shepard, who was on the tour as some sort of writer, Dylan asks Sam how he writes all those plays, and Sam says he does so by "communing with the dead." *The Rolling Thunder Revue* is like that, a medium between a time when passion still lived, and today when death, dying, and nostalgia are the norm for so many whose passion has fled into things. Capitalism has conquered consciences with commodities.

Home Before Dark?

Dylan had his fallow period after the late seventies. To his great credit, he found new life, starting in the late 1990s with his *TimeOut Of Mind* album and continuing through his recordings of the great American songbook of love ballads, the terrain of Sinatra and Bennett. Listening to him sing these great songs he did not write, I find his masks have fallen away and that a sad, lonely man emerges. A man filled with regrets and melancholia. An old man lamenting in a movingly raspy voice lost loves and haunted by what was and what might have been. A death-haunted man voicing raw emotion that is palpable. An uncaged man.

So much about Bob Dylan is paradoxical, or is it contradictory? Hypocritical?

Friedrich Nietzsche, another man of many faces, who advised us to "become who you are," once wrote, "There are unconscious actors among them and involuntary actors; the genuine are always rare, especially genuine actors." I don't know if the man behind the name Bob Dylan is a "genuine actor" (genuine being cognate with genius, both suggesting the act of giving birth, creating), for I have never met him. I hope he has met himself. He hints that

someone is missing, whether that is the fictional actor or the genuine one, is difficult to discern. Is he becoming who he is, or is he lost out on the road “with no direction home”? He is always on the go, leaving, moving, restless, always seeking a way back home through song, even when, or perhaps because, there are no directions.

The Rolling Thunder Revue is a nostalgic trip. No doubt, audiences of a certain age will experience it as such. Such an aching for home comes with a cost: the acute awareness that you can't go home again. When the nursing and funeral home beckon, however, one can perhaps take a chance on truth by examining one's conscience to ask if and why one may have betrayed one's better youthful self and settled for a life of comforting conformity and resigned acceptance of the “system” one once raged against.

Younger people, if they are patient and watch the entire film, will experience a profound aesthetic shock that may give them hope. To see through the camera's eye the youthful Dylan's face as he gives some of the most passionate performances of his life will thrill them so that a shiver will go down their spines and their hair will stand on end. “And this is what poetry does,” writes Roberto Calasso in *Literature and the Gods*, “it makes us see what otherwise we wouldn't have seen, through a sound that was never heard before.” To watch just a handful of these performances makes the film worthwhile.

Become Who You Are?

At one point, today's Dylan says that he has always been “searching for the Holy Grail.” I suppose one could interpret that as meaning eternal youth, happiness, redemption, or some sort of immortality. He has surely created a capitalist's corporate empire, though that doesn't seem to satisfy him, as it never has genuine poets. But maybe to become very, very rich and famous has always been his goal, his immortality project, as it is for other tycoons. One can only guess.

I prefer not to. But without question, Dylan has the poet's touch, a hyperbolic sense of the fantastic that draws you into his magical web in the pursuit of deeper truth. In ways, he's like the Latin American magical realist writers who move from fact to dream to the fantastic in a puff of wind.

He is our Emerson. His artistic philosophy has always been about movement in space and time through song. “An artist has got to be careful never to arrive at a place where he thinks he's at somewhere,” he's said. “You always have to realize that you are constantly in a state of becoming and as long as you can stay in that realm you'll be alright.”

Sounds like living, right.

Sounds like Emerson, also. “Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. Thus one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes.”

Like Emerson, Dylan creates a sense of restlessness in the listener that forces one to ask: Who am I? Am I? He has said “that a song is like a dream, and you try to make it come true.” In a similar way, Scorsese has created a dream with this film. It takes us back and forth in time via an hallucinatory experience. A sort of documentary with a wink.

It is quite a story, powerful enough to induce one to ask: Who are we becoming in this

American Dream? Will we keep sleeping through the nightmares we create and support, or will we return home with Dylan and embrace the radical truth he once gifted us with and dare to “tell it and speak it and think it and breathe it/And reflect from the mountains so all souls can see it” that our country continues to kill and oppress people all around the world as it did once upon a time very long ago?

Our chance won't come again.

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